

History of Devens

Created by the demands of World War I, Fort Devens had been a part of the New England scene for 79 years. It was named in honor of Brevet Major General Charles Devens, a Massachusetts son who served in the Union Army during the Civil War, and later was named Attorney General during the Presidency of Rutherford B. Hayes. Originally a temporary cantonment area known as Camp Devens, the post came into existence on September 5, 1917. Two divisions were activated and trained at Camp Devens (the 76th and the 12th) between August 1917 and November, 1918.

A reception center for selectees following the end of World War I, the camp was designated a demobilization center. Camp Devens processed more than 100,000 selectees into the Army, and as a demobilization center, processed more than 150,000 men out of the Army. On September 1, 1921, Camp Devens was declared excess to the U.S. Army's needs and was put on caretaker status. From 1922 through the summer of 1931, Camp Devens was utilized as a summer training camp for New England-based National Guard troops, Reserve Units, ROTC cadets and Citizens' Military Training Camp (CMTC) candidates. In the summer of 1928, construction of the first two permanent buildings got underway, one a regimental barracks and one a battalion barracks. In 1929, Robert Goddard, a pioneer in rocketry, used the post for his rocket tests.

In September, 1931, the 13th Infantry Regiment was garrisoned at Camp Devens along with three companies of the 1st Tank Regiment. The following month the camp was declared a permanent installation, and in 1932, it was formally dedicated as Fort Devens. At that time, the three tank companies were inactivated and immediately reactivated as the 3rd Battalion, 66th Infantry (Light Tanks). A limited building program continued at Fort Devens, along with a post beautification program throughout the 1930s, with much of the funds coming from the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC).

Following the outbreak of World War II in Europe, plans were formulated to expand the U.S. Army. In 1940, the first peacetime draft in the United States was instituted, and Fort Devens was designated a reception center for all New England men destined to serve for one year as "draftee."

A massive building program was instituted at the post in 1940. More than 1,200 wooden buildings, including two new 1,200-bed hospitals, were constructed at a cost of \$25 million. In 1941, the Fort Devens airfield (Moore Army Airfield) was built at a cost of more than \$680,000. The Whittemore Service Command Base Shop was constructed in 1941-1942 and when it reached its peak load of repairing all damaged U.S. powered vehicles in the First Service Command area, it was known as the largest facility in the world.

Three divisions trained at Fort Devens during World War II. The 1st, 32nd and the 45th, along with the Fourth Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) Training Center, opened on post in April, 1943. Three months later, the WAAC became the Women's Army Corps (WAC). In February 1944, a Prisoner of War camp for 5,000 German and Italian soldiers opened at Fort Devens. It remained in operation until May 1946. In addition to training combat soldiers in World War II, Fort Devens was the home of the Chaplain School, the Cook and Baker School and a basic training center for Army nurses.

Following the end of World War II, Fort Devens once again was designated as a demobilization center. On June 30, 1946, Fort Devens, for the second time in its history, was again put on caretaker status. On September 1, 1946, the post was utilized as an extension of the University of Massachusetts so veterans could continue their education.

The U.S. Army reactivated Fort Devens as a class one installation in July, 1948. With the outbreak of the Korean Conflict, Fort Devens was designated as a reception center for the time in history. No divisions were assigned to Fort Devens during the 1950's but two regimental combat teams were assigned, along with two signal battalions; the United States Army Security Agency Training Center and School; the 56th AAA Brigade; the First Army Chemical Defense School; and many smaller units. During the Vietnam Conflict, the 196th Light Infantry Brigade and the 1st and 2nd Battalions, 2nd Brigade, were sent from Fort Devens to Vietnam. During Desert Storm, Fort Devens prepared active, reserves and National Guard units for deployment to Saudi Arabia.

In its 79 years of service to the country and the New England area, more than 400 units (including a U.S. Navy Air Squadron) have called Fort Devens home. In 1991, the Base Realignment and Closure Office recommended that Fort Devens' active duty mission be eliminated and a small reserve enclave and training area be maintained for use by the reserves and National Guard.

Fort Devens closed its doors as an active duty installation, March 31, 1996, and the next day, it was business as usual at the Devens Reserve Forces Training Area (RFTA). Today, the Devens RFTA supports more than 25 reserve and active component units located here. One hundred fifty-seven civilian employees support 632 active duty military and civilian personnel, 1,537 reservists, and up to 2,000 additional soldiers training daily.

Under the new Devens RFTA, a 5,200 acre training enclave provides 21 training areas, 23 ranges and six facilities that allow for land navigation, orienteering or conducting any small unit Field Training Exercise (FTX), as a drop zone. Supporting nearly 60,000 Army Reserve and National Guard soldiers annually, as well as Navy and Marine Reserve Units throughout New England, the Devens RFTA has emerged as the "Training Site of Choice" on New England's Village Green.

